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ABSTRACT

Psychologists have often observed an underlying pattern or theme in the accounts that individuals give of their lives. To test a humanistic-existential approach to human development, 48 women were interviewed with the Loss and Transcendence (L/T) Life History Form. The L/T Life Theme is expressed in two ways: the expanded version includes the major events, relationships, or experiences contributing to the theme and the core version is a brief bipolar pattern of loss and transcendence. Each subject's protocol was analyzed for themes: major events and relationships as related by the interviewee were listed and repetitions, amount of attention, and significance of events were noted. From the 48 life histories and 5 pilot study histories, 53 case histories were constructed with 53 L/T Life Themes. The results yielded persuasive evidence for the existence of life themes consisting of patterns of loss and transcendence over the life span. Three origins of L/T Life Themes were found: (1) a traumatic life event; (2) a cognitive perception and organization of one's life experiences; and (3) the internalization of both parents. A qualitative analysis of the protocols yielded substantial evidence that life losses were metaphorical of the death of the self and transcendence was metaphorical of the immortality of the self. It is concluded that the L/T Life Theme forms a major conceptual contribution within the L/T approach to life span development. (NRB)

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LOSS AND TRANSCENDENCE LIFE THEMES

by

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ABSTRACT: Within the context of a new humanistic-existential theoretical approach to life span development 48 randomly selected women aged 25-67 were interviewed with the Loss and Transcendence Life History Form. Patterns of loss and transcendence modes were identified; intraclass correlation showed an inter-rater reliability of .85 for these L/T Life Themes. Origins of the themes, the degree to which the interviewees actively perpetuated their themes, the extent of their theme awareness, the relationship of loss to death and transcendence to life and rebirth, and the implications for a life-span theoretical approach are explored.

A number of psychologists have observed an underlying pattern, collection of elements, theme or group of themes in the accounts that individuals give of their lives. In 1962 Gordon Allport observed "the possibility that a life may be understood almost completely by tracing only a few major themes or intentions." He calls them "central motifs," and cites Floyd Allport as proposing the term "teleonomic trends" or life hypotheses held by the individual which can be seen as ordering his/her daily activities. However, he cautions that the appearance of such a theme or hypothesis may be superimposed by the interviewer rather than implicit in the life of the interviewees. Further, he asks how conscious the interviewee is of the theme. Allport agrees with William James that there may be more "dominant trends" than simply one or two.

In 1938 Murray described "an underlying reaction system," or "unity-theme;" these are needs that have their roots in a specific childhood experence, "gratifying or traumatic." Adler conceived of an individual's "life style" as the "spectacles" through which the individual views his/her life. The life style depends on the way

the individual cognitively organizes events, relationships and issues, the "cognitive map." As Mosak described it in 1979, the "life style" includes "the long-range goals of the individual, the conditions.....requisite.....for security." It is largely non-conscious and "fictional," a personal mythology.

In his provocative discussion of affect, Tompkins cites "the phenomenon of connecting one affect-laden scene with another" (1978), a process which he terms "psychological magnification." "Through memory, thought and imagination, scenes experienced before can be co-assembled with scenes presently experienced, together with scenes which are anticipated in future. The present moment is embedded in the intersect between the past and the future in a central assembly." Tompkins call this whole series of scenes the "plot of life," comprised of nuclear scenes and scripts. They may be viewed as thematic, I believe, in that they center around recurring issues, conflicts, regrets, decisions and commitments.

Psychoanalytic clinicians (cf. Dewald, 1972) have observed the "organizing fantasy" of their patients; a traumatic childhood event or relationship has gone unresolved, and has been projected on to adult individuals, relationships and situations; the process of psychoanalysis assists the patient in the transference, regression, working through and eventual giving up of the event or relationship with subsequent healthy functioning.

The existential concept of "life project" around which the individual's choices, commitments, goals and decisions all pivot (Sartre, 1969), might also be construed as the embodiment of a life theme. The knowledge of death, of limited time, is the crucible in which the life project is conducted and authenticity sought. A related concept is Buhler and Massarik's (1968) developmental delineation of goal-setting, which gives purpose and meaning to the individual's life. May (1977), Boss (1937), Binswanger (1958) and other existential clinicians have analyzed their clients and written their case histories within this type of framework.

The life theme has also been defined as "an affective and cognitive representation of existential problems which a person wishes to resolve," (Csikszentmihalyi and Beattie, 1979). Thirty professional and blue collar men were interviewed, and important or traumatic childhood events were found which provided the subsequent theme; this became "the basis for an individual's fundamental interpretaion of reality and way of coping with reality," a concept of theme closes to the Adlerian "life style." A single theme is emphasized, consciousness of theme is suggested, and there is no check on the possible "imposition" of themes by the researchers.

Garraty (1957) points out that biographers have long sought and found simple themes unifying the lives of their subjects. The popular biographies of Emil Ludwig are prime examples; he found in Goethe a tension between genius and daimon; in Bismarck, a conflict between pride and ambition. André Maurois saw the lives of his subjects in terms of metaphors, the symbol of water recurring in Shelley's life and work, of rain and peacocks in Disraeli's.

Finally, a psychobiographical study of Arthur Koestler (Weenolsen and Barron, 1979) yielded a central theme in both his life and his work; this theme is that man is doomed to an unresolvable conflict between his existence as an individual, and his existence as a part of society, a conflict between whole and sub-part.

As part of an overall larger study on the relationship of loss to death, transcendence to life, and the transcendence of loss to life meaning, with a resultant life span development in terms of loss and transcendence, it was hypothesized that each of the life histories would exhibit a pattern of loss and a pattern of modes of transcending loss; further it was hypothesized that while there might be a number of themes, there would be a single theme dominant overall, under which the lesser or sub-themes were related; that individuals would be conscious of their themes; that the themes would originate in childhood experiences or in ways of looking

at one's life; and, finally, that loss would be metaphorical of death for the individual, and transcendence would be metaphorical of the triumph over death, that is, life, rebirth or eternity.

Very briefly defined, losses include not only the deaths of loved ones, divorce, ill health, unemployment and poverty, but also such smaller daily events as failures of skill, friendship, nerve and material possessions, as well as losses of ideals, hopes, plans, illusions and alternative futures. Smaller losses are metaphorical of larger ones, and ultimately of death. Thus each loss, great or small, is a form of death to the self, both in actuality and in concept. Losses, like death, may be on-time, off-time or time-irrelevant, chosen or imposed, internal or external in origin.

Transcendence is the overcoming of loss with the resultant re-creation of a life and a self, which are more or less meaningful. The three modes of transcendence are situational (manipulation), dispositional (defense mechanisms, personality traits) and general (escape from loss in drugs, games, TV, religion, athletics, art, anything in which time, and the limits it imposes, are suspended, "lost," or "forgotten").

METHOD

To test aspects of a new humanistic-existential approach to human development (reported elsewhere), and after a pilot study, 48 women aged 25-67, were randomly selected from a western, urban-suburban coastal community; they were evenly distributed by five-year age segments into three marital-employment groups, married-employed, married-unemployed and unmarried-employed (16 subjects each) They were interviewed with the L/T Life History Form. Interviews ran two to four hours, were taped and taken down by hand, and typed up.

Each protocol was analyzed for themes. The method of determining the L/T Theme is to list the major events and relationships as related by the interviewee, noting repetitions, amount of attention given by the interviewee to the experience,

and significance accorded by the interviewee; how the interviewee reconstructs the life is more important than whether or not, or how, the actual events occurred, for our purposes. Then the researcher looks for common denominators or patterns in the list. For example, Nora's protocol was filled with accounts of how her mother, husband, son, daughter, neighbors, etc. had mistreated her. The underlying loss for her was seen as loss of potential love through the mistreatment, cruelty or inconsiderateness of others, and her own reactions of bitterness and resentment. There was little transcendence in this particular protocol, except for a number of references to wanting to travel, take to the road, go to Europe "in order to see how others survive," as well as a few reminiscences of singular acts of kindness in others. This was interpreted by the raters as transcendence through leaving, or "turning away" from bitter relationship to fantasy (about travel and remembered kindness). The theme was thus supported by the specific major experiences of the life.

The L/T Life Theme is expressed in two ways, the "expanded" or "extended" version and the "core" version. The expanded version includes the major events, relationships or experiences contributing to the theme; and the "core" version is a brief bi-polar summary. For example, Inez, a physician, has been betrayed by lovers, friends and work supervisors from age 18 on, particularly in triangular relationships. She has transcended by service in the form of healing. Her core theme is Betrayal versus Healing. It is important to express the theme in the interviewee's own words as much as possible. For example, one interviewee speaks of liberty, another of freedom, another of independence, and while they have similar meanings (in the dictionary, not necessarily to the interviewees), using the words of the interviewee helps to preserve his/her meaning, rather than imposing the researcher's.

Once derived, the themes were submitted to four judges, trained in the L/T

paradigm, to assess the amount of inter-judge agreement on the L/T Life Themes. A matching procedure was employed. Eight protocols were randomly selected. From these the eight, complete L/T Life themes (expanded and core) were typed on 5 X 8 inch cards and identified as Key themes, the themes to be matched. The themes from the four raters were typed on 3 x 5 inch cards, 32 in all, randomly numbered, and each rater was asked to try to match these key themes, four per key. They then listed the numbers of the cards which corresponded to each theme on a sheet of paper. For example, for Key Theme A, theme cards numbered 7, 11, 19 and 26 were correct.

After all of the ratings had been turned in, the percentage of correct numbers to total numbers (32) was calculated. Two raters had 27 out of 32 correct, and two had 28 out of 32 correct, for an average percentage of .85 inter-rater agreement. While this may be seen as high evidence of inter-rater reliability, the task and procedure were suseceptible to a number of problems, the main one being that each rater could each recognize his/her own ratings. A better method would be to submit the ratings to a fresh panel of judges. While this statistical analysis is promising, a qualitative analysis of the histories is more convincing. These results do suggest, however, that the L/T Life Themes were not merely imposed upon the protocols by the researcher and the judges, against which Allport warned as noted above.

RESULTS

From the 48 life histories (and five pilot) 53 case histories have been written up with 53 L/T Life Themes. Space does not permit an example of a case history, but below are a few examples of the L/T Life Themes to show their nature and variety. The extended theme is set forth first, followed by the core theme.

#101 Lorellen. Loss of stable love through physical violence (rape, abortion, etc.); versus transcendence through natural beauty, physical and spiritual healing

and beliefs; both poles are associate with the counterculture. The core theme is Injury versus evolution through healing.

#102 Crista. Concern with environment, particularly visual, expressed in lifelong conflict between country and city living, which are metaphorically related to death and life; what keeps her in the country is the necessity to be helpful, rooted in childhood when she was reared to help and submerge her own interest for those of others; if she did not, the threat was family violence, break-up and death. Responsibility for others brings its own rewards, but is at the expense of her own identity emergence, of which the environment is an expression. Country as expression of self-submergence through helping versus city as expression of emergence.

#103 Marjorie. Loss of control over traumatic events (suicide of father, molestation by stepfather of self and sister, frigidity, nervous breakdown),versus letting go in order to gain control - letting go of possessions, consciousness through meditation, and eventually identity; she was a <u>victim</u> of loss events, particularly the death of her father. Loss of control versus control through voluntary loss.

#104 Lexie. Splitting of self (or identity) expressed in split of parents, split between career and motherhood, from her body, with society, in the conflict between being and doing, between forms of womanhood and life and dark forces, reality and pretense; this splitting results in recurrent loss of identity. It is transcended by fantasy and by transient satisfactions from both sides of splits. Self versus self, or split self.

#105 Kara. Loss of freedom through the restrictions imposed by religion, family, monogamous relationships, work and the possibility of children; versus independence, freedom from control. She "parachutes" out of any situation that restricts her, enjoys the view and takes control. Restriction versus freedom.

#106 Melanie. Family amid groups of families, marriage as part of group

marriage; work with groups, family, town and world as community, and the importance of communication among these networks; versus loss of significant relationships. Loss of Community versus transcendence by community.

DISCUSSION

Variety of L/T Life Themes: One of the most interesting observations to be made about the extended themes is their variety. Even when several different L/T Life Themes involved superficially common events, these seem to have their idiosyncratic application in individual lives. For example, "disrupted relationships" are common to most, perhaps all lives, to a greater or lesser degree. But when one takes into account which relationships are disrupted (family, childhood, work, male or female, etc.), how they are disrupted (moves, rape, betrayal, erosive fighting, death, other people, etc.), why they are disrupted (personalities, war, jealousy, accident, physical or mental illness, etc.) the response to the disruption (depression, challenge, fantasy, passivity, escape, changed behavior, faith, art, living through others, etc.,) as well as the metaphorical meanings of disruption - when one takes all these into account, one discovers great variability in the L/T Life Themes. In fact, each is unique.

Origins of Themes: L/T Life Themes seem to have three sources. One source is some external event or situation, often traumatic, and often occurring in childhood or adolescence, such as the loss of a parent. A second source is the internal perception or cognitive organization of the individual, by which s/he sees the events as forming a pattern. However, a traumatic life event results in certain internal perceptions, and these, in turn, may be based on non-traumatic external events. Still a third source is the internalization of both parents; when these parents are very different from each other, and additionally in conflict, a split self and resultant L/T Life Theme may emerge.

External Origins: For those whose L/T themes seem to originate in specific

external life events, there is quite a variety of these events which are mentioned as foundational: the sudden death of a parent at an early age; the gift of an art book; the assassination of a public figure, the unexpected divorce of parents, etc. Often, there is a cluster of events, such as repeated beatings, mental or sexual abuse, alcoholic violence, inordinate restriction, and fighting on the one hand, and occasions of family community, being saved from death, positive medical experiences, on the other. The context of the event, as well as the personality of the interviewee, may help explain why similar events, such as the deaths of parents, can have different impacts.

It is possible that a traumatic childhood event, which often leaves a wake of other difficult events, prepares the child to see life in terms of this event, prematurely in terms of death, for example, which translates into unpredictable comings and goings of individuals perhaps, intimacy as threat, attachment as more secure if it is materialistic rather than emotional. It is possible that among later events, those more salient to such an individual are those which remind her of the death; that is, she responds to such events differently from the way she would have responded had the parent not died, with more vigilance, or more regret, or more effort - all seeding theme.

Losses Repeated: There is another phenomenon that appears in the case histories of those with themes of external origin, and that is a repeated pattern of events apparently beyond the individual's control. Lorellen, for example, endured repeated instances of sexual violence (three rapes, three abortions, etc.). Alice sustained repeated accidents and handicaps. The marriage of Willa to an alcoholic (he wasn't to begin with) seems like awfully bad luck after a history of alcoholism in father, aunt, uncles, brother, etc. (Is there an "alcoholic personality" to which she is attracted)? Frances' history of involvements with sexual perversion really sounds like a bizarre series of accidents as it is related in the protocol. Why this apparently

accidental attraction to circumstances that repeat previous losses?

The answer may be that previous losses were not satisfactorily transcended, that the interviewees keep setting the same problems for themselves so they can overcome them; that creating similar losses in a life gives one the opportunity to transcend them and, in so doing, to transcend the original loss for which they are metaphors. This type of transcendence is enormously greater than the transcendence of a single loss, leading to such a high that the risk-taking may be worth it. A phenomenon similar to the psychoanalytic concept of transference may be occurring, except that the transference is not necessarily to the individual or the analyst in the therapeutic setting, but to the event in an entire context of self and life meaning, so that it can be worked through, or result in integration. Psychoanalysts tend to explain by defining; a woman marries an abusive husband for the second time, because she is a masochist. In the L/T paradigm, the individual has experienced a death of self in the sense that part of self has been destroyed; the terror is always that all of self may die; the individual may be willing to risk additional death for the possibility of life, self and meaning enhancement. It should be observed here that the secondary losses are metaphors of the original loss, not simply displacements as in the Freudian paradigm, because the entire Self structure rather than one event or aspect, is involved.

But something else is going on with Lorellan and others like her, who suffer such patterns of apparently "unlucky" losses. They are saying, in effect, that such losses should not have happened, and therefore will not. A woman should be able to go to isolated places without being raped. These individuals not only see their relationship to the world somewhat unrealistically; they are repeatedly trying to rearrange the world, or reshape it, so that rape or other loss will disappear, rather than accommodating themselves to the world. Their creative efforts are

focussed on tasks less susceptible of success, rather than on themselves. They are experiencing loss of the world as it should be - a world without loss, without any form of death. But perhaps they do this because they see Self as less likely to be successfully re-created. The answer here may lie in that period of life in which they learned how people differ from societal ideals, the older childhood and early teen years. They respond by trying to create the ideal world. Then they themselves will be ideal.

Internal Origins: Even when an L/T Life Theme cannot be traced to a single event, there is often a value, standard, or attitude within the external environment which seems related to the theme. For example, Sibyl met her husband-to-be in the course of her work, traveling through a wide area, performing a service for people. She states that she was "important," and therefore he asked who she was, and others knew who she was and introduced her because of that importance. But her assessment of the situation is clearly an idiosyncratic one, as her work was of a middle level of prestige (similar to being a visiting nurse) rather than a high level. However, she alludes to her father having been "prominent" (also a questionable assessment), to herself as having been "watched" in college because important things were expected of her, having received prestigious awards, etc. An attitude toward prominence as desirable seems to have been in the home. And this attitude was, in a sense, external to her before she identified with it, took it to herself, and began the life-long pattern of interpreting people and events in terms of their "importance." In the L/T paradigm, people who are important may be too important to die, a theoretical interpretation borne out by data on longevity which shows longer life in those of higher socioeconomic status, probably because of improved health care, more knowledge of healthful lifestyles, higher intellect, better work satisfaction, and more money for a healthier life.

Event Saliency: Even though both externally and internally originated L/T

Life Themes seem to be fairly well demarcated, a personal reconstruction of the life is going on in both instances, and there is no way of being sure to what extent subsequent events make previous events more salient. For example, Alice, whose recent life has been extremely dfficult because of the birth a few years ago of a retarded child, begins her interview with the observation that a sibling was handicapped. Later, it develops that this handicap was a minor one. One wonders if its salience was present before the birth of her child - quite possibly not. In our efforts to make sense of present life, seek coherence, find causes or explanations, we may resurrect the heretofore inconsequential.

Consistency of L/T Life Theme: Would individuals, who give a certain theme at forty, have given the same one at twenty? Obviously, the question is not finally answerable without a longitudinal study of some type, but we can make a few educated guesses. We can, for example, hypothesize that L/T Life Themes during life periods that are more adjacent should be more similar than themes which are farther apart, just as personality is more likely to be consistent in adjacent life periods (Kagan and Moss, 1962; Brim and Kagan, 1980). That is, we might better expect a theme of a thirty-year-old to be quite similar to the one she expressed when she was twenty-five; when she is fifty, there is more likelihood of change, if only in the supporting life events. Perhaps some losses will drop away in saliency, and new ones or more effective modes of transcendence will arise - or the reverse. When we look at the case history of Germaine, we can readily believe that her theme might have been different before the death of her ideal husband ten years ago - perhaps ten years ago he was not ideal? My findings of family life themes which extend over generations (Weenolsen, 1978) lead me to expect considerable consistency over the life span, especially when the themes seem to have arisen from the values and orientations of the parents, as in Sibyl's case.

Awareness of Theme: In general, while 33 of 48 interviewees responded that

they saw a theme, most of them expressed this theme in terms of a value which had not been mentioned much, if at all, in the protocol, such as "doing good." Only three saw their theme as the rater saw it, and 16 saw one pole of their theme, but not the other. Part of this could have been due to lack of training in the paradigm. But the conclusion from these data must be that, by and large, interviewees are not aware, or are only partially aware, of their L/T Life Themes. This indicates that they may not be consciously dictating the thematic course of their lives, or not consciously acting out their lives according to pattern. (This is especially interesting in view of the findings that most interviewees report an active, lifelong life review process).

Recurring Themes: There are two categories of themes that recur across the protocols. The first category includes core L/T Life Themes that are similar, such as the similarity between "restriction versus freedom" and "dependence versus liberation." The second category includes other single themes which occur across protocols, but which are not in themselves L/T Life Themes. We have already mentioned the fact that core themes apparently similar are in reality very different. There were three of these recurring themes. They were 1) self-creation, 2) freedom versus restriction or the self versus the whole, and 3) taking control of one's life rather than passively accepting it. Themes that recurred across protocols but were not necessarily Life Themes included: 1) the notion that the interviewee sets out to create the home she did not have as a child; 2) finding or creating substitute families, like the theatre; 3) mothering the parent, often in the parent's last days; 4) questionable decisions, particularly regarding marriage; 5)special recurring dreams of a house; 6) conflict between city and country living; 7) conflict between family and career; 8) cruel or failed parents inspired the child to do better, (especially common in transcendence-oriented histories).

CONCLUSIONS

This study yields persuasive evidence that life themes really do exist, and further, that they consist of patterns of loss and transcendence over the life span. While there were a number of themes in each life history, these seemed easily connected and readily subsumable under a major theme.

That individuals were conscious of their themes was generally not borne out by this study, although a sizable number were aware of one pole. The difficulty here may have been a vagueness on the part of the interviewees as to what a life theme was (although the word "pattern" was suggested); methodologically it seemed inadvisable to explain too much for fear of "setting up" something that might not exist, or having a theme created on the spot. The issue of awareness was related to the extent that an interviewee might dictate his or her life along preconceived lines, and for many, this did not seem to be happening consciously. That experiences were repeated without this awareness augured for the theoretical explanation that there was an attempt to transcend original loss by setting up metaphorical losses.

Three origins of L/T Life Themes were found instead of one. They were 1) a traumatic life event, 2) a cognitive perception and organization of one's life experiences, and 3) the internalization of both parents, their major modes of loss and transcendence in conflict so that this conflict became the interviewee's, defined the self, and then became the L/T Life Theme. It was pointed out that the three origins often worked together, rather than being mutually exclusive.

Finally, a qualitative analysis of the protocols yielded substantial evidence that life losses were metaphorical of the death of the self, and transcendence was metaphorical of the rebirth or immortality of the self. Many interviewees gave direct evidence, likening a loss to a death, for example (see Crista's L/T Life Theme). Thus, it would seem we are in continual metaphorical conflict bet-

ween life and death.

The development of each individual may be told in the context of on-time, off-time and time-irrelevant losses sustained, the modes of transcending these, the emerging themes, the process of assimilation and accommodation within the self as a response to loss and transcendence, the stage of the Loss and Transcendence process, and the stage of self-development.

It is concluded that the L/T Life Theme forms a major conceptual contribution within the L/T approach to life span development.

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